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ABSTRACT

Examination of the characteristics of models of Western critical thinking from a different perspective may help educators realize what these models do not allow. Western processes of reasoning are highly Aristotelian, based on Platonic dialectical forms. Relationships of the parts are established upon clearly defined criteria, and the methods tend to be linear. Western logic demands acontextual analyses, and critical thinking urges explicitness to achieve a decontextualized analysis. These methods of critical thinking reflect a low context culture in which individuals discern meaning by attending to clear and explicit signals. In a high context culture, extremely important meanings are embedded within the context. Integration of context into critical analyses is not new, nor is it idiosyncratic to a particular cultural tradition. Most critical thinking texts demand explicitness, but explicitness does not guarantee clarity. Limitations are created when explicitness is a criterion by which legitimacy of evidence is judged. Two additional characteristics of Western methods are the propensity to reject experiential evidence and the tendency to focus on the ability to control the future. An alternative view of critical thinking embodies all of the analyses offered by the Western tradition as well as the whole of experience and respect--for life, for consequences of all action. By denying the legitimacy of other forms of critical analyses, Western methods cannot access powerful and important thought that does not conform to its prescribed forms, and there is no way to evaluate those forms that influence the world in powerful and not necessarily ethical ways. (RS)

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"It's Not Getting at 'Real'": Exploring Alternative Approaches to Critical Thinking

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R.L. Scott (1973) has said that we must search for "senses" of rhetoric, and that these are rooted in experience. We must look at the functions of speech as it occurs in specific contexts. Through speech we, at least in part, define symbolically what is. Through discourse, says Foucault (1969), we determine what we take to be knowledge.

For us, looking at critical thinking is inevitably an exploration into the epistemological consequences of the forms of thinking we are defining as good. We do not have answers to offer today. We only have questions. For us the questions are bothersome ones, and we share them as a way to extend discussion about the forms of communication that facilitate competent problem analysis. Through this discussion we also hope to raise questions about what we ought to teach.

The teaching of critical thinking is characterized by many strong prescriptions. We teach students highly scripted criteria by which to judge whether they are indeed engaged in critical thinking. There are good reasons for this. Groups do a better job, for the most part, if they adhere to these prescriptions. Groups analyze problems more thoroughly, more competently, and more accurately if they exercise what is typically recognized as "critical thinking"—at least some groups do.

But some groups don't. Hirokawa (1985), in his study of the functional perspective on decision-making, points out that many who study small group decision-making have begun to argue that the exact

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way in which a group reaches a decision may not matter as much as the functions that are performed in the process of decision-making. Research on decision-making effectiveness has been inconsistent. Any of us that teach small group communication can testify to the fact that simply applying a set of steps to a problem will not necessarily result in effective decisions. Those of us teaching in the legal profession can as well testify to the fact that strict application of rules of analysis will not necessarily result in a just decision.

Yet, when it comes to teaching critical thinking, we tend to teach just those steps. We are also well aware of student resistance to critical thinking, in application. It is worth asking what this resistance reflects. If critical thinking makes a difference, if it can be demonstrated to work, why resist?

If we go to the principle of intermittent reinforcement it makes sense. If people are intermittently reinforced for behavior that works *some of the time* that behavior is remarkably hard to extinguish. And if what we teach doesn't recognize the elements that are at work, and if we offer no reasons why those *functional* elements should be replaced with our prescriptions—that are adequate in our narrow class exercises, but that are perceived as deficient in critical ways when it comes to "real life"—why shouldn't our prescriptions for critical thinking be resisted? Perhaps they ought to be.

If critical elements are missing in our models of critical thinking, then we are remiss in the assessments we make based upon those models. Further, if we have decided that only those characteristics of analysis that conform to our predetermined criteria are legitimate, there are several consequences. First, we limit what we see as legitimate only to what we are <u>able</u> to see—because we are not looking for <u>how</u> other characteristics might function legitimately, effectively, or competently in a discussion. We are defining as existent, and hence as study-able, only those idea forms that conform to our definition. An idea is only taken as an existent idea if it conforms to qualities that allow it to be processed by a certain set of procedures. Otherwise, the idea is not legitimate, and, therefore, in the world of critical thinking, it doesn't exist. This leads to our second consequence: we blind ourselves to alternatives developed and used by those who have very different contexts with which they must contend—contexts, for example,

that do not conform to the ideal of equal access to the floor, or that function under very different systems of power and authority.

This raises further questions about our models of critical thinking, and whether the methods we use to teach critical thinking, based upon those models, are deficient. If they are, then we need to carefully and critically look at those models to determine what we are missing. Furthermore, we must open our eyes to the functional elements of procedures and forms of communication that do not conform to our prescriptions. We believe that we must look very specifically at what is commonly rejected in typical discussions of critical thinking. We start by considering the characteristics of models of Western critical thinking. By looking at these characteristics from a different perspective we hope to begin to show what they do not allow us to see when we only look through them. We want to focus on the following characteristics, many of which revolve around the Western value on explicitness and clarity:

- The dependence upon linear relationships
- The desire for acontextual analyses versus analyses dependent upon context (versus? Are we stuck in dualistic thinking? Will our audience understand if we use "and" (as we should) that the exclusiveness of typical Western approaches is what we are questioning?)
- The demand for explicitness versus embeddedness of meaning that cannot be known verbally
- The suspicion of experience versus the belief that experience is vital to the understanding
- The focus on future and the desirability and ability to predict the future versus a belief in the necessity to reflect upon the past, and to coordinate with the past

Probably one of the most apparent characteristics of Western methods of critical thinking is that it is based upon a logic rooted in Western philosophical tradition. Reasoning follows inductive processes that are ultimately subjected to deductive analysis. The process is highly Aristotelian, based on Platonic dialectical forms. Matters are divided into smaller parts to make them more manageable. The parts are analyzed through processes of definition. The relationships of the parts are established based upon some clearly defined criteria. Often these relationships are hierarchical: decisions are made about importance, based upon criteria defining what makes something important. Our methods tend to be linear. We move along time-lines that are linear. We look at relationships in a linear way. One thing "causes" or "leads to" another in a step-wise progression that we often visualize as hierarchical. Even when we make web-like maps in an attempt to see multiple relationships, we still tend to use lines to make connections—a

visual metaphor enabling a sense of interconnectedness, but that still embraces linearity. We assume the superiority of rationality unencumbered by passion.

Western logic, therefore, demands *a*contextual analyses. Critical thinking values decontextualizing, and urges explicitness as a means by which to accomplish it. We urge students to define terms. Concepts are to be discussed with terms clearly defined, parts labeled, and assumptions laid bare. Students are challenged to define and make clear the bases of their analyses. We value objectivity. We are admonished to keep our *selves* out of it. Individual emotional reactions are more likely to be seen as contaminating the process than as helpful to it. The *subject* of study should be the focus of attention—not the attendant external influences over which we have little (if any) control. Individual reactions and individual experiences regarding the subject of study are suspect. Evidence should be replicable, something virtually impossible if individuality and uncontrollable elements of context are acknowledged.

Let us now offer a comparison. Our methods of critical thinking reflect a culture that is predominantly a low context culture (see Sillars and Weisberg, 1987; also Anderson, 1994b). By this we mean that individuals discern meaning largely by attending to signals that are explicit and generally clear as to their intention. Consider, now, the very different requirements of a *high* context culture. In a high context culture, extremely important meanings are embedded within the context. To separate a thing from that which surrounds it inherently changes that thing. It gains its meaning only in conjunction with those ideas, issues, factors, matters, or elements that exist with it. To divorce a thing from its context by sorting it into its respective separate category and defining it separate from its context is to inevitably make it what it is not.

From a low context cultural frame, it can be difficult to accept that the meaning attributions characteristic of a high context frame are even reasonable. We who have been socialized and trained to be low context may not even *see* the signals that those with a high context frame find crucial to understanding. Furthermore, signals that are meaningful in a high context frame may be such that articulating them will change the very nature of what they are. The ambiguity inherent in this kind of

signaling is part of the context—and to remove the ambiguity changes the meaning of the context entirely. To verbalize is to transform, and may well distort.

The work examining the role of context in other rhetorical traditions indicates that this integration of context into critical analyses is not new, nor is it idiosyncratic to a particular cultural tradition. Anderson (1994), in a comparison of Arab and American conceptions of "effective" persuasion noted that contextual understanding and contextualized references are essential to the rhetorical strategy of Arab rhetors. Likewise, Lu and Frank (1993), in discussing ancient Chinese rhetoric/bian argue that it is impossible to understand the rhetorical tradition and theoretical writings of the ancient Chinese separate from the context out of which it emerged, nor is it possible to understand the ways in which the rhetorical strategies function without looking at the role of contextual understandings.

In critical thinking, this variance in regard to context may show itself in several ways. One way is evident in descriptions of the forms of argument used by those socialized within the Lakota and Ojibwe cultures. Forms of argument are described as following a daisy-pattern, in contrast to the linear dialectical patterns we teach with critical thinking. In the daisy pattern, ideas are not laid out in a form that leads directly from one conclusion to the next. Instead, background context is developed, even before identifying what the point of the discussion is. The central idea—the center of the daisy—will not be addressed in full until the entire background is thoroughly provided. In fact, the central idea may not be explicitly discussed at all. Instead, the background context and the richness of that context makes the sense of the central idea evident. Meaning is embedded in the context. Meaning cannot be known separate from context. To separate an idea from context by delineating it in words will distort, and it will diminish the validity of the idea. To put in concepts in linear form, as distinct entities lifted from context, is to change the nature of that which is under discussion. To do so would inevitably result in analyzing something that is not really there and ultimately ignoring the essentials of what is. Indeed, to be explicit may well result in being unable to address the issues that are the problem.

This is a true story. There was a man once who had a dog that barked at night. That dog barked and barked, and kept neighbors up at night. This man did not seem to care. He did nothing to stop his

dog barking. So a group of neighbors talked about this problem—they could not sleep because of the barking dog. One man said, "I know what to do," and without knowing what he would do, and without asking what he would do, the community gave its assent. The man went and talked with the man. He did not talk about the dog. He talked about the neighborhood. About the weather. About how the man was. And the neighbor asked if he could come back and visit. And he did, and they talked about the neighbors, and so-and-so who has been sick and needs rest, and ....before long, that dog did not bark at night anymore. Nothing was ever said about the dog, or the problem or barking at night, or angry upset neighbors. The context created the frame for just one behavior being acceptable within that context: to keep the dog quiet.

The demand to be explicit, then, a requirement of our models of critical thinking, may have some harsh consequences. It could be argued, of course, that the problem analysis of the man with the barking dog was probably explicit. But it was it? We would wager that applying Western principles of critical thinking to that problem would have been less likely to result in arriving at the solution that worked: a solution that utilized the power of the ambiguity of context.

We, in the Western tradition, tend to identify "analysis" with "explicitness." Most of our texts demand explicitness in critical thinking, especially in groups undertaking exercises that we believe require critical thinking. For example, Makau (1990), in discussing critical thinking and communication, emphasizes the need for clearly stating any assumptions implicitly influencing a given analytic inquiry or statement. Gouran (1986), in his discussion of inferential errors, states that it is important for group members to state explicitly the reasons for their assertions. (Much of the advice given for improving interpersonal communication, by the way, does the same). There are good reasons for this advice. Explicitness makes it possible for all to make sure they each understand the assumptions underlying decision-making proposals. Once those assumptions are explicit, it is easier to assess their validity, in *our* traditional ways. It is easier to see the *linear* relationship of ideas, if those ideas are explicitly discussed. We know there is value in those methods, and we are not disputing that value in this paper.

Nevertheless, explicitness does not guarantee clarity. Within a high context cultural frame, explicitness may, in fact, be suspect. For example, one may choose to focus attention on the irrelevant by making it explicit. As a result, what is most important may remain unsaid and unseen. Deception, however, is not the only problem with explicitness. What may seem on the surface to be rather insignificant may in actuality be loaded with meaning. Whether a highly intentional signal or a sign embedded within a context only understandable within that context, such implicit messages may carry powerful and highly significant evidence.

Consider the assumptions upon which our insistence upon explicitness rest. First, we are assuming that all knowledge of relevant issues is at the point where an individual can symbolize it. If explicitness is a criterion by which we judge whether an idea is relevant and whether a thinker is legitimate we are likely to accept as relevant only those ideas that are explicit. Furthermore, that explicitness must follow appropriate form. The expression of ideas must conform to accepted definitional and reductive processes. In Western approaches to critical thinking, words are tools, used to reflect and manage thought. The challenge of language, in this tradition, is to get it to come as close a possible to representing the objective reality sought. Our current methods of critical thinking assumes that language can adequately represent thought. The Western tradition prescribes a reductive, definitional process to achieve that proper representation. Furthermore, use of particular language is limited to specific groups. Others may not only look silly using such language, they may be subject to sanctions should they use it because they are not properly credentialed. Yet, we may insist that these language forms be used to express certain ideas. The result is that the only thought able to be expressed is that associated with and expressed by certain socially sanctioned beings. It is important to recognize that not all thinkers have equivalent access to the floor (thus having the opportunity to be explicit) and that certain language can only be used by those socially sanctioned to use it. Only those with access to the floor are perceived as, and defined as, legitimate thinkers, and hence as legitimate contributors to the evolution of knowledge. The subtle inputs of those who do not have equivalent access to the floor tend not to be recognized. If the ideas reemerge, it is often because they are re-expressed by a sanctioned voice. In this way, they have, at

minimum, been separated from their essential context, and so have been voided of much of their power. The insistence upon explicitness therefore functions to maintain the power relations existent within the social group defining the rules by which one may be explicit (see Foucault, 1969).

Legitimacy of evidence is fundamental to our prescriptions for critical analyses. Evidence should be sufficient, but what is "sufficient" depends upon what is deemed legitimate. There should be correspondent evidence, but again, not all that is offered as evidence is deemed legitimate. To be legitimate, evidence must come from objective, authoritative sources, with authority defined in specific ways, and with authority speaking in highly scripted ways. Knowledge is defined as not legitimate, then, and therefore is rejected when it is seen as coming from illegitimate sources (because of lack of social sanction), as based upon or arising from unacceptable principles (because the thought is not sanctioned by the current power structure as based upon what that power structure defines/divines as "fact"), or are not being expressed following "proper" procedures (i.e., explicitly).

It is important, then, to look at the limitations created when explicitness is a criterion by which we judge legitimacy. Being explicit limits. It creates boundaries. To define something is to limit what it can be. Scott (1973) argues that we must recognize the difference between "definitions" and "senses." A unified definition may be possible, but it may mislead because of its very focusing of attention. Rather, recognizing "senses" of a thing, "senses" that may be shared, allows for an expansiveness of ideas, and is inclusive of unthought-of factors, factors that are yet to be integrated into that-which-we-know.

The problem is not in trying to clarify, and in trying to create methods for evaluating thinking processes. Rather, the problem is in assuming that if one cannot be explicit, or chooses not to be explicit, then the idea that is not represented explicitly does not count, is not legitimate, or does not exist.

The question of legitimacy of evidence focuses attention on two additional characteristics of Western methods of critical thinking: the propensity to reject experiential evidence and the tendency to focus on the future with an eye to controlling it.

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Experiential evidence is highly contextual and it is loaded with implicit meaning. The language used to deal with problems may need to be implicit because of the multiple functions served by the verbal expression. For example, when dealing with the American judicial system, many Native Americans are confronted at the outset with problems of language choice. Particularly, the harshness of words taken for granted in legal advocacy, such as being "in dispute" or "in conflict", are not appropriate. Instead, many Indian people choose to say they are "having troubles" or that they are "not speaking" just now. To explicitly say there is a serious disagreement may carry a meaning that will be regretted later. Feelings may be derived from words misunderstood.

The function served by these language choices is integral to the problem analysis and resolution in these matters. The base of these choices for Indians is spiritual. The connectedness of all things are their essence. Peacemaking focuses on unity and harmony, on balancing the spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical parameters of a community of families and individuals. We all must come back to the circle, regardless of the issue. Problem analysis for many Native Americans is relationship centered. It is not agreement centered. Individual experience is essential in this approach, for the experiences of the individual are crucial to the understandings that will embody the connectedness of all things. I need not agree on your experience for it to exist.

Western methods of critical thinking are highly suspicious of experience as a form of evidence. We insist upon documentation of that experience: how representative is it, we ask (got any numbers to support that?). What's your source for that experience? Any experts to back you up? Or are you out on that limb all by yourself? In Western tradition legitimacy of evidence is based upon agreement among many as to its legitimacy. Again, we have good reason for this suspicion. Individual experience is used to justify all sorts of horrible action. Narcissism is powerful in its ability to blind one to external consequences of actions taken under its spell. But rejection of experience denies a perspective that views experience as vital to the understanding.

Our methods are also future focused. Our methods embody the belief that it is desirable to predict the future and that we are even *able* to predict the future. We put a premium on causal

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prediction. If a problem is analyzed well, we believe that we should have a pretty good idea that the consequences predicted will indeed be likely to come to pass if the recommendations based on the analyses are actually put into place. We seek and value permanency. We want to "pin down" the evidence, so we can understand the problem and find ways to fix it (exercise dominion over the problem). Our future orientation is consistent with our demand for decontextualization. We want solutions that are acontextual. Our analyses need to be separated from context so solutions will work regardless of the context that comes to be. We seek laws. Western models of critical thinking, reflecting a belief in the desirability to control the forces around us in order to create a better future, have tended to ignore those elements that cannot be controlled, that cannot be defined clearly, that cannot—or ought not—be explicit.

In an alternative view, critical thinking embodies all of the analyses offered by Western analyses and more. In this view, critical analysis happens only after we have also looked at something, thought about it, bemoaned it, hoped for it, wept for it. Emotion, experience, reaching for the most hoped for result—that is what comprises critical thinking. Experience is what *creates* this. It is experience out of which respect for existence grows; for your very life comes from experience. Experience is that within which critical thinking is grounded. It is not until we've been shocked, afraid, scared, happy, worried, and more that we are even *capable* of critical thinking. Critical thinking is not how to apply mechanical principles. It is an intellectual entity untouchable because it is everyday doing and living.

Critical thinking in this way is the height of maturity. It is the analytic *plus* the whole of experience and respect—for life, for consequence of all action grounded in *coordination* with the past so that the now and the future can exist in harmony (harmony, not dominion over, is the goal). Emotion is a critical element here: passion and heart are integral to critical understanding. One cannot know without knowledge of heart. Passion and heart cannot exist separate from experience. The sharp dualism of Western tradition makes no sense here. It is, in truth, non-sense.

We recognize that questioning traditional Western methods of critical thinking is a two-edged sword. Critical analyses and systematic thinking have developed as ways to attempt to be able to determine what can be seen as legitimate, to identify distortion, to determine what is manipulation, and to

give us a way to increase our ability to make right, ethical, and moral decisions based on the best assessments we can make of how the world is configured. Bad decisions hurt people. Despots and tyrants are better able to control those who cannot determine the truth of what they say.

We believe, however, that our tendency to refuse to acknowledge as existent evidence that does not conform to our systems of thinking has resulted in our inability to evaluate other forms of thinking that are important, that are effective, and that are powerful. Without a means to evaluate these forms we cannot judge their ethical and moral character. Western tradition has tended to judge all these forms as inevitably contaminated, hence inevitably unethical and leading to decisions buttressed by questionable morality. Nevertheless, our denial of other forms does not make those alternative modes of reasoning and forms of evidence cease to exist. What we do not have are understandings of how to evaluate them. We believe we have lost on two counts at least. First, by denying the legitimacy of other forms of critical analyses traditional Western methods of critical thinking cannot access powerful and important thought that does not conform to its prescribed forms. We thus fail to achieve the levels of morality and ethical action to which a *whole* understanding could bring us. Second, we have no way to evaluate those forms that influence our world in powerful and not necessarily ethical ways, but that cannot be fitted into our linear, reductive, systematic forms of analyses.[1]

We have no prescriptions. At this point we offer our observations. As educators, we hope our discussion will engender inquiry and closer observations. It is our hope that we might contribute to the evolution of a way of conceptualizing critical thinking that will truly allow all of us, as critical thinkers, to get at "real."

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[1] One could argue that these influences might be subjected to aesthetic evaluation. In Western tradition, aesthetics has tended to be seen as "soft," and as not as important as the "real" analyses offered in the logic of philosophy or the natural sciences. This denigration of the importance of the arts may well be related to this discussion.

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